

Rotary as an Idea

Community Comment

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If you watch our local television stations you may have seen some short spots that tell a little about local Rotary Clubs. In the coming week or so, the Arcata Rotary Club will host a segment that are called Rotary minutes. I've been a member of Rotary International and the Arcata Rotary Club since 1984.

I joined Rotary at the invitation of a local business man. I was teaching part time and was in the process of starting our Victorian Inn. I was also on the Arcata City Council at the time. My first thought was what many people think when they hear Rotary Club; a bunch of fat cat white guys having lunch together, doing a little business, and the occasional community project. I didn't think this was for me. Then I went to a couple of meetings and found out more about what these guys did.

Rotary is an American invention. It started in 1906 when a small group of business leaders in Chicago decided that there was merit in meeting as a group weekly to talk business, share ideas, and discuss how they might better their community. The second club was the San Francisco club. They eventually sponsored the Eureka Club. The essentials of Rotary are three fold; humanitarian service, high ethical standards, and building goodwill and peace in the world. I had no idea.

When I joined Rotary, it was an all male club. It changed soon after I joined when women were welcomed. This was long overdue. The club is about equal in men and women members now and new clubs often have more women than men. The idea that an international club was actively working towards world peace was especially appealing to me. The idea of one to one student exchanges with other countries and other Rotary Clubs provides a great opportunity for these young ambassadors to live in a foreign country, learn a new language, and share ideas. One kid, one family learning about other cultures and supported by a Rotary Club on each end. We have hosted students from Germany, Japan, Thailand, and Argentina over the years. It's been an enriching experience for the whole family and our circle of friends.

Since that first meeting in 1906, Rotary now has more than 1.2 million members in over 200 countries in 33 thousand clubs. These clubs take on small local projects like building or fixing playgrounds, ambitious projects like bringing clean water to small communities in Viet Nam that never had clean water in their history, to grand projects like the eradication of the Polio virus from the face of the Earth. Over 1 billion children have been vaccinated. In 2011, only 80 cases of polio were reported; in the world. We will do this.

More than anything, Rotary is an idea. Local clubs are 100 percent volunteers. We share funds we raise with Rotary International because we can do more that way. But no one

pressures us to do anything. We, as a club, choose our projects. Local club leadership changes every year and new members bring new ideas.

When you hear about Rotary and have an opportunity to support your local club, I hope you will give it a second thought. It's a local idea that's also become a grand global force for change.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.